On Racial Harmony

A Statement Approved by the Administrative Board, National Catholic Welfare Conference

August 23, 1963

1. Nearly five years ago, we the Catholic bishops of the United States proclaimed with one voice our moral judgment on racial discrimination and segregation. This judgment of November 1958 simply reaffirmed the Catholic position already made explicit in a much earlier Statement in 1943. In the present crisis, we wish to repeat those moral principles and to offer some pastoral suggestions for a Catholic approach to racial harmony.

Racial Justice a Religious Question

2. We insist that "the heart of the race question is moral and religious. It concerns the rights of man and our attitude toward our fellow man…. Discrimination based on the accidental fact of race or color, and as such injurious to human rights, regardless of personal qualities or achievements, cannot be reconciled with the truth that God has created all men with equal rights and equal dignity."
3. We reaffirm that segregation implies that people of one race are not fit to associate with another "by sole fact of race regardless of individual qualities…. We cannot reconcile such a judgment with the Christian view of man's nature and rights." These principals apply to all forms of discrimination and segregation based on prejudice. In our immediate and urgent concern for the rights of Negroes, we do not overlook disabilities visited upon other racial and national groups.
4. It is our strict duty in conscience to respect the basic human rights of every person. Our beloved Pontiff of blessed memory, Pope John XXIII, stated this fact in his encyclical *Peace on Earth*. He proclaimed that, "in human society, to one man's rights there corresponds a duty in other persons: the duty, namely, of acknowledging and respecting the right in question." He not only condemned racial discrimination but asserted that "he who possesses certain rights has likewise the duty to claim these rights as marks of his dignity."
5. Respect for personal rights is not only a matter of individual moral duty; it is also a matter for civic action. Pope John stated: "The chief concern of civil authorities must…be to insure that these rights are acknowledged, respected, co-ordinated with other rights, defended and promoted, so that in this way each one may more easily carry out his duties.
6. We know that public authority is obliged to help correct the evils of unjust discrimination practiced against any group or class. We also recognize that every minority group in American seeking its lawful rights has the obligation of respecting the lawful rights of others. On this point, Pope John wrote:
7. "Since men are social by nature they are meant to live with others and to work for one another's welfare. A well-ordered human society requires that men recognize and observe their mutual rights and duties. It also demands that each contribute generously to the establishment of a civic order in which rights and duties are ever more sincerely and effectively acknowledged and fulfilled."

8. These truths being understood, no Catholic with a good Christian conscience can fail to recognize the rights of all citizens to vote. Moreover, we must provide for all equal opportunity for employment, full participation in our public and private educational facilities, proper housing, and adequate welfare assistance when needed.

Christian Charity

9. But more than justice is involved. There is also the divine command: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Our present Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, at the beginning of his pontificate, reminds us that "Revelation teaches us to love all men, whatever their condition, for they have all been redeemed by the same Savior; and it obliges us to offer to those who have least, the means of arriving in dignity at a more human life."
10. It is clear that the racial question confronts the conscience of every man, no matter what his degree of direct or indirect involvement. Indeed, the conscience of the nation is on trial. The most crucial test of love of God is love of neighbor. In the words of the beloved Apostle: "If anyone says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar. For how can he who does not love his brother, whom he sees, love God whom he does not see?"
11. We can show our Christian charity by a quiet and courageous determination to make the quest for racial harmony a matter of personal involvement. We must go beyond slogans and generalizations about color and realize that all of us are human beings, men, women, and children, all sharing the same human nature and dignity, with the dame desires, hopes and feeling. We should try to know and understand one another.

Positive Steps toward Racial Harmony

12. To do this we must meet and talk openly and sincerely and calmly about our mutual problems and concerns. There are many ways in which such meetings can come about peacefully and naturally and fruitfully. For example, those in the same type of work can readily discuss the problems caused by racial barriers. Physicians of one race can talk with those of another. So can businessmen, teachers, lawyers, secretaries, farmers, clerks, and other workers. Parish and diocesan societies, political gatherings, and civic and neighborhood associations can be common meeting grounds.
13. Our important task is to break down the barriers that have caused such grievous misunderstandings in the past. When barriers have existed for many decades, deep misunderstandings have all too often arisen. These should be faced, not in a spirit of debate, but with a desire to open doors of understanding.
14. It is not only by open and free exchange of ideas that we can understand the rights and obligations that prevail on both sides. Such knowledge is the prelude to action that will remove the artificial barriers of race. We must act to remove obstacles that impede the rights and opportunities of our Negro brethren. We should do our part to see that voting, jobs, housing, education, and public facilities are freely available to every American.
15. We can do this in our own area of work, in our neighborhood, in our community. We may act through various lay organizations of the Church, as well as with civic groups of every type. In many parts of the nation there are interracial committees representing the major religious faiths as well as

the important aspects of civic life. We bless and endorse such efforts to secure interracial harmony and to implement it in everyday affairs.

16. But civic action will be more fruitful, and its results more lasting, if all our citizens openly and explicitly proclaim the religious basis of racial justice and love. Accordingly, we repeat simply: Love one another, for this is the law of God. Revere in every man his human dignity, for this is a gift of God.
17. United, as men and women of every faith and race, we can heal ancient wounds of division. Thus our nation will reflect its true greatness, a greatness founded on the moral principal that all men are free and equal under God.
18. In all these endeavors, we must remember that they labor in vain, who seek to work without almighty God. Our daily prayer for guidance will give us that confidence and courage we need to seek racial justice and harmony in our land. Above all, it is our prayer that the love of God may revere in every man the image of the eternal God.